



Principal's Leadership Styles in Implementing “Merdeka Belajar” in Schools

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ABSTRACT (10 PT)

The study intends to explore the leadership styles of school principals in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum at various school levels in Indonesia. The study used a literature review method, looking at publications and other relevant sources published from 2022 to 2023. Based on the findings of five selected papers, there were five distinct leadership styles: democratic, situational, transformational, progressive, and religious. The leadership of the principal style during the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum affects the school's success, influencing teacher performance, student growth, and overall school quality. Democratic leaders value collaboration and diversity, situational leaders adapt to changing situations, transformational leaders inspire inspiration, progressive leaders create solutions, and religious leaders apply spiritual values. Therefore, the study emphasizes the significance of adaptable leadership styles and the need for efficient and effective education leadership in the *Merdeka Belajar* era.

ABSTRAK (10 PT)

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pendekatan kepemimpinan kepala sekolah dalam menerapkan kurikulum *Merdeka Belajar* di berbagai Tingkat sekolah di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode tinjauan pustaka, dengan melihat hasil publikasi dan sumber relevan lainnya yang diterbitkan dari tahun 2022 hingga 2023. Berdasarkan temuan dari lima publikasi artikel yang terpilih, terdapat lima gaya kepemimpinan yang berbeda: demokratis, situasional, transformasional, progresif, dan religius. Gaya kepemimpinan kepala sekolah memengaruhi kesuksesan sekolah, kinerja guru, pertumbuhan siswa, dan kualitas sekolah secara keseluruhan. Pemimpin demokratis menghargai kerjasama dan keberagaman, pemimpin situasional menyesuaikan diri dengan situasi yang berubah, pemimpin transformasional menginspirasi motivasi, pemimpin progresif menciptakan solusi, dan pemimpin religius menerapkan nilai spiritual. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya gaya kepemimpinan yang adaptif serta kebutuhan akan kepemimpinan yang efisien dan efektif di era *Merdeka Belajar*.

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Introduction

Education is one of the most critical factors defining the characteristics of a country's people's capabilities and advancement. In continuous change, the educational process fosters

innovative and imaginative thinking. Curriculum implementation demonstrates the validity of correct educational policies. According to Munandar (2017), the curriculum is the foundation of schooling that determines educational continuity. Based on Law No. 20 of 2003, the curriculum comprises a collection of educational programs encompassing aims, subject matter, instructional resources, and strategies that guide learning activities to meet a national pedagogical goal (Rahayu et al., 2022). Therefore, education is critical in shaping a nation's human resources and development, developing creativity and innovation, and implementing effective policies, with the curriculum serving as its fundamental pillar.

There have been various adjustments and revisions to the curriculum in Indonesia. According to Ulinniam et al. (2021), improving the curriculum is a phenomenon that all nations must experience. Changes and revisions to the curriculum began in 1947, 1964, 1968, 1973, 1975, 1984, 1994, 1997 (1994 curriculum revision), 2004 (Competency-Based Curriculum), Curriculum 2006 (Unit Level Curriculum or *Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan*), 2013 (Kurtilas), 2018 (Revised Kurtilas), 2020-2021 (Emergency Curriculum) and up to 2022 (Merdeka Curriculum).

The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum is a new policy initiative of the Republic of Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture (*Kemendikbud RI*), introduced by Nadiem Anwar Makarim, Minister of Education and Culture in the "*Indonesia Maju*" Cabinet. According to him, teachers should be inspired by the spirit of intellectual liberty before passing it on to students. He stated that effective learning can only be translated between core competencies and the current curriculum, regardless of teacher ability level. The data indicate that Indonesia has to improve in mathematics, science, and literacy. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students lost their education through online learning. Furthermore, many school principals and teachers need help to adjust to autonomy due to limited resources, inadequate training, and reluctance to change (Khoirurrijal et al., 2022). As a result, current studies focus on addressing these challenges.

The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum allows students to learn freely and comfortably. It enables them to remember calmly, relaxed, and enthusiastically while considering their potential, encouraging the growth of independent, intelligent, cultured, and capable individuals (Rahayu et al., 2022). Khoirurrijal et al. (2022) said that the benefits of this curriculum include simplicity and depth, increased freedom, relevance, and interactivity. In addition, teachers can identify and tap into students' potential, including their ability to think and reason, and give them the freedom to learn. *Merdeka Belajar* emphasizes freedom and autonomy for educational institutions to investigate students' competencies (Muryanti & Herman, 2021). The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum holds significance for the educational system of teachers and school principals (Saputra & Ramadan, 2023). Thus, the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum promotes a student-centered, autonomous, and joyful learning environment, fostering the growth of independent and capable individuals, and it is significant for teachers and school principals.

The principal is crucial for administering and developing schools in the *Merdeka Belajar* period. According to Saputra & Ramadan (2023), the principal is a school leader who is fully accountable and plays an important role in improving the school's quality. Moreover, Latifah (2022) asserts that enhancing the quality of education is an integral element of the principal's responsibilities. The principal's leadership is responsible for a school's success. Competent school principals can increase the professionalism of instructors and staff, the intelligence of students, and the community's involvement in the school's progress. Therefore, school principals are accountable for the achievements of *Merdeka Belajar* implementation and are required to have excellent and effective leadership styles.

Leadership is effective and efficient when based on determined functions and objectives. *Leadership style* is a characteristic a leader uses to guide the organization and their subordinates in achieving a goal (Imtinan, 2021) and to influence their subordinates to perform periodical tasks in pursuit of a goal (Dewi & Lazwardi, 2022). There are three categories of leadership styles, according to Rivai, as cited by Rosita & Iskandar (2022): authoritarian or directive, democratic, and laissez-faire. The subordinates of a leader with an authoritarian or directive style must obey the orders of their superiors directly, while the leader makes decisions independently. In contrast to the authoritarian leadership style, the democratic leadership style is characterized by a more cooperative leader with subordinates and consults with them before making decisions. Regarding the laissez-faire leadership style, a leader grants subordinates the freedom to innovate while acting as a facilitator. However, Purwanto & Asbari (2020) define three leadership styles: transformative, transactional, and authoritarian. The transformational leadership style instructs leaders to inspire those around them, to be optimistic and enthusiastic about the future, and to encourage their subordinates to be creative and innovative when confronting new challenges. The transactional leadership style involves a feedback cycle between superiors and subordinates, in which superiors provide rewards or salary increases for subordinates who perform well. Regarding authoritarian leadership, the leader has absolute authority in making decisions.

The principal's leadership is responsible for conducting educational policies and monitoring the school's performance. Competent school principals can manage challenges and foster collaboration among teachers, staff, and stakeholders, making them a crucial focus for understanding the dynamics of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in Indonesian schools. Despite their essential role, more empirical research needs to be done into how principals adapt their leadership styles to fit the demands of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. This study fills that gap by investigating Indonesian school principals' various leadership styles at the elementary and senior high school levels. This study uses a literature review to explore principals' leadership styles in implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum at various school levels in Indonesia.

Method

This research utilized a literature review, with study materials based on scientific writings, books, articles, and other relevant valid sources. This method is also known as library research, in which data obtaining includes examining and comprehending data from books, notes, journals, and documents closely related to the research problem (Mastur, 2023; Rosita & Iskandar, 2022).

The first step in the research process is to formulate a review question. During this phase, the researcher developed the research question: "What and how do principals employ the leadership styles at different school levels in Indonesia for implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum?" In the first phase, all relevant publications published between 2022 and 2023 were reviewed to ensure the accuracy of the data supplied. In the second phase, appropriate published research articles were screened and selected. In the third stage of this research, which consisted of analyzing and synthesizing findings, content analysis was used to analyze the data (Latifah, 2022). All research data sources were analyzed to determine principals' leadership styles.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the main findings reviewed from five selected published articles the researcher has read. Table 1 indicated that principals' leadership styles at elementary and senior high school levels were democratic, situational, transformational, progressive, and religious. The researcher describes the findings of each article as follows:

Table 1. Leadership Styles of Principals in Implementing *Merdeka Belajar* in Schools

No.	Author and Year	Title of the Research	School Level	Principal's Leadership Style
1.	Alfian Yogi Saputra, Zaka Hadikusuma Ramadan (2023)	<i>Gaya Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah dalam Pelaksanaan Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar</i>	Sekolah Dasar (SD)	Democratic Leadership
2.	Betty Nur Rayanti, Ipong Dekawati (2022)	<i>Kontribusi Kepemimpinan Situasional Kepala Sekolah dan Efisiensi Media pembelajaran terhadap Mutu Pendidikan</i>	Sekolah Dasar (SD)	Situational Leadership
3.	Khalifatus Saadah, Ainol, Ismatul Izzah (2023)	<i>Kepemimpinan Transformasional Kepala Madrasah terhadap Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di Probolinggo</i>	Madrasah Aliyah Negeri (MAN)	Transformational Leadership
4.	Rusmanto, Sofyan Anief, Waston (2023)	<i>Dampak Kepemimpinan Progresif Kepala Sekolah Penggerak terhadap Merdeka Belajar di SD Muhammadiyah 1 dan SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Surakarta</i>	Sekolah Dasar (SD) & Sekolah Menengah Atas (SMA)	Progressive Leadership
5.	Muhammad Syahri, Rannga Kari, Erick Burhaen (2023)	<i>Kepemimpinan Kepala Sekolah SMA Swasta Teladan Sei Rampah Serdang Bedagai terhadap Perkembangan</i>	Sekolah Menengah Atas (SMA)	Religious Leadership

*Kurikulum
Merdeka Belajar*

Based on findings, Saputra & Ramadan (2023) discovered that the SD Pekanbaru principal adopted a democratic leadership style when implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. The principal established strong interpersonal relationships with subordinates. The principal asked for input and required staff and teachers to make regular decision-making and policy formulation. In addition, the principal frequently recognizes and rewards teachers and personnel for their superior abilities or accomplishments. It was done to make those who achieved success feel appreciated and inspire those who have yet to succeed. In addition, the principal provided teachers and personnel with clear instructions and guidelines for implementing the school's work program within the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum to facilitate comprehension. Furthermore, the principal collaborated on an ongoing basis in program evaluation. The principal constantly observed punctuality and actions in accordance with the principles of equality during implementation.

According to Rayanti & Dekawati (2022), the success of school principals in situational leadership is dependent on the phenomenon of leadership in certain settings. It implied that an effective school principal could adapt their leadership approach to the ever-changing demands of the situation. The combination of situational leadership by the school principal and the effectiveness of learning media could produce a quality-focused school culture. In this context, the administrative and operational aspects of the school would collaborate to adjust to changes to meet the needs of the students, resulting in an improvement in educational quality. Consequently, both the school principal's situational leadership and the efficacy of learning media contributed to the quality of education provided by the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. In other words, the educational rate would increase if the school principal demonstrated situational leadership and maximized efficiency.

Khalifatus Sa'adah et al. (2023) indicated that the transformational leadership of Madrasah MAN 2 Probolinggo's principal was already optimal. The principal possessed a charisma that fostered a sense of enthusiasm and provided high motivation for the Madrasah's resources. The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum's implementation capacity was proved through curriculum-related socialization. The Madrasah principal may also mentor, guide, and inspire the teachers. The principal encourages students' personal growth. Moreover, the Madrasah principal offered learning materials, resulting in an intellectually encouraging environment within the Madrasah.

Furthermore, Rusmanto et al. (2023) found that SD Muhammadiyah 1 and SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Surakarta principals could be categorized as school principals who use progressive leadership styles. The innovative leadership of SD Muhammadiyah 1 and SMA Muhammadiyah 1 affected the students' capacity to advance their thinking and take creative action. The school administrators prioritized dynamic and progressive programs within the school. In addition, they incorporate diverse stakeholders (participatory approach) into their work and activities. The principal utilized technological advances for educational programs. He also encouraged and mobilized subordinates to participate actively. He then engaged in consultation, consensus-building, and democratic decision-making. The progressive leadership style resulted in both achievements and drawbacks. Government policies, money, special stakeholder support, and an ideal setting supported the principal's progressive leadership at SD Muhammadiyah 1 and SMA Muhammadiyah 1 in Surakarta. However, factors leading to failure included the variety of human resources at both SD and SMA Muhammadiyah 1 in Surakarta and a need for more facilities and infrastructure.

The last findings was a religious relationship. (Rusmanto et al., 2023) revealed that the leadership approach of SMA Teladan Sei Rampah's principal was oriented toward spirituality and religiosity. The principal sought to establish a conducive learning environment, produce students who were religious and faithful to God, master knowledge and technology, and possess a global perspective. In addition to encouraging teachers to participate in career development training, the principal conducted reflective activities to evaluate past and forthcoming events. In addition, the principal supervised teachers, including those who served on the learning committee and senior teachers. In Indonesia, there are five main approaches to leadership at the elementary and senior high school levels. The discussions are depicted below.

Democratic Leadership Style

Democratic leadership is centred on the needs of its constituents and provides effective direction to its members. According to Mattayang (2019), democratic leadership respects the potential of every individual and is open to subordinates' advice and suggestions. A democratic leader is respected and esteemed as opposed to fear because their behaviour in organizational life inspires associates to cultivate and develop their innovative and creative skills.

A democratic leader listens attentively to the ideas, suggestions, and even criticism of others, particularly subordinates. The democratic leadership style emphasizes the human element as the most essential aspect of any group or organization. The democratic leadership style emphasizes behaviour as a protector and builder of the group or organization. A leader includes all members of the group in decision-making.

Situational Leadership Style

A school principal with a situational leadership style views the group's objectives as maintaining group integrity by fostering better relationships among group members. According to Rayanti & Dekawati (2022), the unity and involvement of individuals in the school environment are viewed as stimuli for democratic attitudes, team and institutional effectiveness, and a sense of responsibility that can foster a sense of ownership and maintenance.

When school principals are attentive to their subordinates' work, they consider the importance of unity and participation in making decisions to ensure the continuity of quality education in the school environment. That is consistent with the findings of Dwiyani & Sarino (2018), which suggest that the situational leadership style of a school principal can improve teacher performance. Furthermore, Suparmi (2019) confirms previous research showing how a school principal's situational leadership style has a beneficial and essential impact on teacher discipline. Teacher effectiveness and discipline are crucial indicators of education quality.

Transformational Leadership Style

A transformative leadership style occurs when one or more individuals engage with others, so leaders and followers push each other to greater motivation levels. (Murniasih; et al., 2023). The transformational leadership style is characterized by strong management and a concentration on increased motivation, inspiring subordinates with a vision of the future and enabling them to accomplish what is expected. Transformational leadership is how leaders and their teams raise their moral and inspirational levels (Khalifatus Sa'adah et al., 2023).

Progressive Leadership Style

Progressive leadership is a leadership style that emphasizes innovation in addressing current problems and developing appropriate solutions. According to research conducted by Awaluddin & Nashir (2021), progressive leadership involves selecting personnel who play a significant role in operating the organization's apparatus professionally and fairly. In the era of information technology, leaders can also leverage advances in information technology and social media to spread information and promote initiatives.

Religious Leadership Style

A religious leadership style is an approach to leadership that is greatly influenced by religious beliefs, values, and principles. Generally, it is practised within religious institutions such as churches, mosques, temples, and other faith-based institutions. Religious leaders base their leadership decisions and actions on their spiritual teachings (Arista et al., 2023; Rondo & Moku, 2021). However, there needs to be more adequately published articles on the religious leadership style of the principal while implementing the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The roles of principals are critical to improving the standard of education during the *Merdeka Belajar* period. The study emphasizes the significance of adaptable leadership styles and the need for efficient and effective education leadership. In Indonesia, there are five distinct leadership styles at the elementary and senior high school levels. These styles are democratic, situational, transformational, progressive, and religious. The upcoming researchers should investigate the differences between leadership styles at various school levels in Indonesia, which is a limitation of this study.

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